

THE LIBRARIAN IN THE KNOWLEDGE AGE: THE NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the role of the librarian in the knowledge age from the perspective of the Role Theory. A role is the expected behaviour associated with a particular status. The Librarian performs his role in relation to the activities of other members of the organization called his role-set. Members of this role-set were identified and their expectations of the Librarian highlighted. The paper advocated for the librarians' attitudinal change to enable them to be relevant in the knowledge age.

INTRODUCTION

Library is a major component part of information system. O'Brien (1996:6) defines an information system as "... an organized combination of people, hardware, soft-ware, communications networks and data resources that collects, transforms and disseminates information in an organization". The knowledge age depends on information system (IS) or the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for survival. Information professionals as the Librarians are familiar with the many types of information systems that today's information-end-users have to rely upon. These are the "diverse range of electronic library services that are currently dominating the world of information storage, retrieval and dissemination" (Ayo, 2001). The electronic library now transforms data resources into different kinds of information products and packages for users to access freely both physical and remotely.

The "knowledge Age" concept may have grown from the work of John Naisbitt (as cited in McKeown 1985:5) when he coined "the information society" as that where the majority of the workers are involved in the transmittal of information. It may also have resulted from the activities of what O'Brien (1996) refers to as the "global information society" with a global economy whose peoples are in service occupations and are called "knowledge workers". These knowledge workers spend their

work day creating, using and distributing information, as well as manage resources anywhere in the global information society as long as their organizations and outfits are interconnected by local, regional, and global telecommunication networks. This situation has given rise to the concepts of the "virtual workplace", "telecommute" and "information float". The virtual workplace is that which is electronically connected to its clientele. To telecommute means 'going to work while in your home'. Information float is the time taken for information to travel from one point to another. All this is the bane of the knowledge age that the Librarian is confronted with.

THE ROLE OF LIBRARIAN IN THE KNOWLEDGE AGE

The role of Librarian in the knowledge age can be analyzed from the Handy (1993) Role Theory theoretical framework. According to Handy (1993), the theory provides that each individual in any situation, occupies a role (performs a function) in relation to other people's roles or expectations. Thus, a role is the expected behaviour associated with a particular status. It is thought of as a set of rights and norms, duties and responsibilities designed to mobilize human effort in a predictable manner (Appelbaum and Chambliss; 1995; Boot et al. 1982). In playing that role, success or failure depends on the forces within the individual and those in the organization outside of the individual. The forces within the individual include his personality,

attributes and skills, while those in the organization include management support, the activities of members of his role-set and the role definition in relation to the prevailing circumstances. The librarian as the information professional in the knowledge age is the focal person playing a focal role.

The members of the librarian's role set are all those who at one time or the other require his services. In the institutions of higher learning, his role set members are the academic staff, undergraduate students, postgraduate students, non-academic staff, principal officers, government officials, accreditation panels, immediate host community and others. Each category of people has a specific role expectation of the Librarian depending on their respective information needs. The librarian on his part will have his own role definition. That is, what he thinks that members of his role-set expect from him. According to Handy (1993), "the definition of any individual's role in any situation will be a combination of the role expectations that the members of the role set have of the focal role". If the role expectations of the librarian do not tally with his own role definition, he will experience bouts of role ambiguity whereby he will be unsure precisely as to what his role should be at any given time as shown in the diagram below.

The Undergraduate Students

To the undergraduate student, whoever is seen working in the library is a librarian. The student believes that all his questions concerning his lecture needs should be answered by the "librarian". The freshman in higher institution is insecure in most places around the campus except in the library environment. The library thus provides both security and serenity to the freshman.

In the present knowledge age, some undergraduate students come into tertiary institutions already possessing sound knowledge of most information and communication technologies such as computers and their numerous uses. Their questions are sometimes technical and demanding on the skills of the professional librarian. Therefore, their role expectations of the librarian must be high. This implies that librarians will have no choice but to become conversant with ICT in library services

or else they will sooner or later lose the confidence of their major clientele as they would be seen as failing in their leadership role expectations. The new knowledge age undergraduates expect much more information from librarians today than in the past.

Post-graduate Students

These are the advanced students undergoing more advanced academic programmes and researches. Their information needs vis-à-vis their leadership role expectations of the librarian are quite complex yet focused. Some may not want to visit the library and or the librarian once disappointed. They do not have plenty of time to waste. To this group of library users, the librarian is a research partner who is more conversant with the latest research formats, procedures and information sources than they (students) are. This group also is fully aware of the latest information facilities. They can identify a skill-gap in the information professional leadership of the librarian easily. Thus, the librarian must be ready to meet up to their expectations.

The Teaching Staff

To the teaching staff, the librarian has more to assist him than assist the students. Most lecturers believe (and quite rightly too) that they are the ones in charge of the students directly and the business of the students in the library is to use the conducive library environment for study and for references to the books by their lecturers. Consequently, the librarian is there to serve the needs of lecturers. Where this leadership expectation is not met, the image of the librarian is threatened. In the tradition of publish or perish, the librarian shares in the stress and tension of the lecturers, who must keep track of the latest books, journals and other library materials relating to the lecturers' research interests. The librarian is seen as a mailman to the lecturers as the former is expected to provide among others selective dissemination of information (S.D.I.) services to the latter. Very few academic staff see it as part of their obligation to visit the library for the latest acquisitions.

The librarian is expected to know the individual research needs of the teaching and academic

staff. This is achieved by maintaining a database of information on this category of users. The database may be in a manual physical or electronic computerized format. The latest format is most preferable but the manual format can still serve the same purpose, though it is more cumbersome and time-consuming. Most teaching staff are not aware of some facilities meant for them that are available in the library. For example, in the course of this study, a lecturer was surprised to hear that there is a reference material in the library that provides information on the addresses, etc. of international journals where he could forward his articles for publication. This may sound too basic a knowledge for a lecturer but that is the reality. Thus, the librarian has more work to do in the area of creating awareness of the services available in the library if he has to advance his leadership position in the information profession.

Non-academic Staff and other Principal Officers

The non-academic staff are those members of the institution who are not directly involved in teaching, research and general academic programmes of the institution but nonetheless need the services of the library. This category of users needs the library for daily and weekly newspapers and magazines, books, recreation and some specific government publications. Some of them may be undergoing part-time programmes of study within and outside the institution. Ifidon (1999:45) specifically identifies some members of this group to include the institution's Bursar, the Director of Works, the Faculty Boards Officers, the Registrar and University Bookshop Managers. The activities of these people directly affect the operations of the library system. Their interests should also be served by the library. They have their own expectations of the librarian's leadership role.

Government Officials

This category includes the honourable members of the House of Assembly, Commissioners, Directors-General, Special Advisers, Political party leaders, Trade Union Leaders, Managers of Business concerns, etc. Occasionally, these people come to seek for specific information such as statistics on various disciplines. They expect the librarian to satisfy their needs which often times are urgent.

Immediate (Local) host Community

Members of the host community where the library is located has a stake in the library facilities since some of the sons and daughters of that community may be making concrete developmental contributions to the parent institution of the library. Some materials relating to the local people and some aspects of their culture may be necessary for the library to acquire. For this reason, the host community will be making occasional demands on the library's services which the librarian must put into focus in his plans and services.

Accreditation Panels

These are regulatory panels instituted by the Federal Government of Nigeria and the professional bodies to standardize academic programmes in the country's institutions of higher education. These panels examine the library stock, quality of lecturers and general physical infrastructure in relation to the respective programmes. They exert a lot of pressure on the librarian who must answer all questions put forward to him by members of the panel. Sometimes, the questions are quite demanding, especially where the library facilities and services for such programmes appear inadequate to the panel.

Autonomy of the Library System

The library is a system that is part of a larger organization. However, the library may still retain some level of autonomy if the parent organization so desires. The library and information literature, particularly those relating to Nigeria is replete with the case for or against autonomy. Library autonomy implies the ability of library to order, acquire and pay for library materials without an approval or much difficulty for doing so from an overarching authority. In this sense, the library utilizes the knowledge and skill of his professional team and that of the Bursary Division of the University to administer the library system. Of course, the Head of the library gives account of the activities of the library to an authority but not to the extent of forestalling books and non-books orders

professionally selected by the library to meet the needs of the knowledge age.

Library autonomy also includes the nature and the management of funds for the library system. It also implies that the library is self-regulatory in all aspects. To a very large extent, the degree of autonomy of the library determines the leadership role the librarian can exercise. It is of interest to note that some academic libraries such as that of the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria has its account section for handling its accounts.

SOCIO-CULTURAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The cultural environment is very crucial for the performance of leadership role of the librarian. Culture determines how members of a society think and feel, it directs their actions and defines their outlook on life. It includes the collection of ideas and habits, which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation. The individual's culture is his 'design for living' (Ralph Linton as in Haralambos 1980:3). Man does not have instincts to direct his actions and so his behaviour derives from his culture. Deviant behaviour is only so defined relative to the accepted norms of the society into which the individual is born.

Culturally, most African countries rely on oral tradition for knowledge acquisition, storage and dissemination (Amadi: 1981). Reading culture and the book trade are generally alien to the African way of life. This informs the observation made by Amadi (1981: 219) that African reactions to all imported media "... whether they be books, films, radio, or television...do tend to be different to the extent that African audiences differ psychologically from others". Consequently, it appears that the majority of Africans are yet to come to terms with the importance of the library system as a source of information or knowledge. It should not be too surprising to find poorly funded public, and academic libraries in most African countries.

In Nigeria, for instance, public libraries are found only in the big cities and some urban centres while rural communities hardly own anything like a library or own a community reading room with basic reference books. The rural communities themselves and sometimes the urban dwellers, rarely think that they are losing

anything at all by not owning a public or branch library in their area, and so there is nothing wrong in their absence. A rural community in Nigeria will rather request for any project to be sited by the government or any donor agent other than request for the provision of a library. This culture inadvertently extends to the attitudes of policy makers and heads of institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. For instance, once there is any cash squeeze, in the funding of an institution, the first causality is the library system. The librarian's leadership and persuasive qualities may have little or nothing to change the situation.

The non-book tradition and poverty force, majority of Nigerian children to go through this kind of experience and so, when they become adults holding positions of authority, the importance of the library system hardly crosses their minds naturally. After all, they made it even as Chief Executives of these higher institutions of learning without using any public or community library. Consequently, the administrative "policy" for such a library seems to be saying that "the students should purchase their textbooks, concentrate on them and they would come out successful in their semester examinations". At best, there should be a reading place (a library?) conducive enough for the students' serious study of his own textbooks and lecture materials. The implication of such a scenario as we have painted here, for advancing the leadership role of the librarian is that he may call forth all his professional and managerial skills yet, the Chief Executive will not see any need to regard the library as a priority area. Here, the librarian's leadership skill will be directed at what Amadi (1981: 215) terms "deprogramming", "debunking", "reorientation" and "deschooling" of all the relevant members of his role set. All these will involve carrying out some psychological therapy sessions within and outside the library.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The librarian does not advance his leadership role in the knowledge age in isolation. He acquires the effective participation of every member of his role-set, particularly the management of the parent institution. The

librarian needs relative autonomy in funding and acquisition of relevant library materials to advance his professional leadership potentials.

The factors that lie within the librarian to advance his leadership roles are his professional and managerial skills. He should have absolute control over these factors when given the opportunity.

Another factor for advancing the leadership role of the librarian is the degree of autonomy granted the library system. Thus, the institutions of higher learning in Nigeria must accept that the librarian is an information professional, trained in information acquisition, storage and retrieval in whatever form. On his part, the librarian must up-date his professional skills and knowledge to be able to advance his leadership role in an ever-forward moving knowledge age. The state of preparedness of the librarian professionally will go a long way in influencing his Chief Executive's attitudes and policies for the library system. The Librarian must also be prepared to face the new challenges in information and communication technologies as they apply to information acquisition, storage, retrieval and dissemination.

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